

A Chinese Nurse's Socio-Cultural Experiences in Australia

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"Travelling is better than reading thousands of books." -Du Fu

Studying overseas for international students means a lot--not only being away from home but also experiencing quite a few unexpected difficulties. It looks like a triangle of a pyramid since each part is closely connected with each other, and it falls apart if one part is not functioning! Studying abroad is full of challenges for every student due to the language barrier, culture shock and homesickness. For students who speak English as a second or foreign language, this is because being disconnected with families, friends, familiar environment and even preferred food may lead to directly or indirectly physical discomfort and emotional stress. I chose overseas studying as I was eager to understand the cultural differences, linguistic variables, and to establish my interest in community and medicine!

Culture Shock and Language Barriers

I was born and grew up in an ancient city called Luoyang in the middle of China. I was a different person culturally and linguistically in Sydney, Australia. My Chinese hometown was famous for growing peony flowers, and I had wonderful friends and people around. Before coming to Australia, I worked as a Registered Nurse in China for 13 years. I was married and had a happy nuclear family.

However, in order to arrive at my true dream, I had to temporarily leave my family as well as my steady job in May, 2006, and came to Sydney, Australia. The visa that I got was a training visa, which was sponsored by an Australian aged care agency. In return, I was assigned to work as a caretaker in diverse aged care facilities in Sydney. During the first three months, I was homesick and suffered from culture shock. It was unthinkable that as a foreign woman with limited English, how hard it would be. The major challenge I was faced with in Sydney was the language barrier. Whenever my agency rang me up to offer some shifts to me, I could not understand thoroughly what they were saying. Obviously, this greatly affected my work, which in turn, enabled me to feel depressed. Finally, the kind agency staff found a solution, namely recruiting a Chinese lady to help me.

Difficulties would never stop. It was acknowledged that Sydney is a metropolitan city with blue skies and crystal-clear beaches. Nevertheless, I could not indulge myself in this beautiful scenery since every day I struggled for getting to the workplace on time. It seemed that there was no regular pattern for me to know when my agency would give me a call. Sometimes they called me at

night time. Although I hated to be interrupted during bed time, I could not say “no”. This is because if they were unpleasant, they would cancel my working opportunities next time.

The Influences that Church Friends Gave Me

As an old saying goes, *a friend in need is a friend indeed*. My life became colorful after I met Susan, a Chinese nurse from Hebei Province of China in Australia. She was a short lady with a round face, but her smiling face gave me a good first impression. Susan was a Christian, so under her great influence, I started to go to church regularly. Stephen was a gentle Australian young man. We became friendly gradually during church activities. In order to improve my English abilities and under his encouragement, I began to write a diary in English. Stephen was a responsible tutor and checked my writing carefully once a week. My writing skills significantly improved. Additionally, as a result of recreational activities such as bush walking, climbing mountains and rowing canoes with my church friends, my spoken English improved significantly. To my happiness, I eventually could understand what my agency would say by phone. Also, my work performance gained appreciation from other staff.

In 2007, I was invited to attend my church friend Chaohui’s graduation ceremony. Chaohui was a nursing student from Malaysia. I still remembered the thousands of people that witnessed this grand event along with cheerful college students who shared their joyfulness with tearful family members. At that time, I could not help but thinking how wonderful it would be if I could acquire the degree from the university in Australia. One day, I talked to Jane, my trainer, about my feelings. She encouraged me to never give up my dream. Admittedly, Jane’s encouragement had a profound impact on my later decision.

Language Preparation

Later, I got a conditional offer from Flinders University, Adelaide, so I returned to Australia again with the student visa on 19 March, 2008. I arrived to Adelaide before Easter holiday. The staff from Studying at International English Language Institute (IELI) picked me up at Adelaide airport and sent me to the host family. The accommodation was an old castle-style house, which was located in the uphill. The house owners were a kind old couple. Eating the delicious food cooked by the landlady on the first night, I had a sense of family belonging.

My first day in IELI was the placement test. My results demonstrated communication skills in level 5, reading and writing in level 5 and listening in level 4 out of a band of 9. I was told that I must completely finish level 6 before July. Otherwise, I could not start my nursing course in July, 2008. This devastating news enabled me to feel upset since I thought that I probably could not finish the language course before July. Under the suggestion of tutors, I booked the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam on 21st June, 2008.

The first session (5 weeks period) went quickly. My results drove me crazy because my reading and writing reached level 6 (I got 87%), my communication skills still stayed at level 5 (I got 80%) and my listening skills arrived to level 5 (I got 85%). I was half happy and half sad at that moment. Reading and writing was a tough topic for the majority of international students. There was no exception for me. In order to finish the homework with good quality, every single night, I had to stay up late for studying. As an old saying goes, no pain, no gain. I got 90% and easily passed my reading and writing tests during the second session. Furthermore, both my listening and communication skills improved from the level 5 to level 6. It only left the final five weeks before university classes started. Surprisingly, I seemed to have created a miracle since I got 85% marks in

listening and communication skills and also I passed the IELTS exam. My results showed listening 6.5, reading 6.0, writing 7.0, speaking 7.0 and overall 6.5 out of 9. Moreover, I got a job interview from an aged care facility and I got a casual position as a caretaker in this nursing home soon.

University life in Adelaide, Australia

One Year Bachelor of Nursing Course

I became a university student in Flinders University in July, 2008. However, the university life in Australia was accompanied by many unexpected hardships and frustrations. I was confused during the first week since I did not know about how to prepare for the tutorial. Later, I found out university students in Australia mainly focused on computer-based self-study, which means that students have to do more readings before class. I borrowed 15 books from the library, and put them on the floor in my room at random. The books lay on my beautiful blanket, but I did not want to read them. I heard the university provided students with free counseling, so I made an appointment on the second week. The counsellor whom I met with was a knowledgeable British lady. After listening to my problems, she suggested for me to balance between work and study and eat healthy food.

I had four topics during the first semester, I felt so stressed when the exams would come. I emailed the tutor whose name is Margaret, and she offered many useful exam coping strategies to me. I reviewed my notes and gained a better understanding about the topic. My exam results further proved that the effort that I made was worthwhile.

I got lost one night when I finished my shift in the nursing home. I used to go home on foot and it took me around 15 minutes. However, I could not find my way home that night since my head was full of exams and essays. Later, I called my landlord and wanted to clarify the right direction. However, I could not provide him with the exact location where I was at that time, so he angrily hung up the phone. I felt nervous and frightened. Even worse, I thought of calling a taxi but I found I forgot to bring my purse with me. After two hours wandering the streets, I eventually arrived at home. In July, 2009, I graduated from Flinders University with the Degree in Bachelor of Nursing.

One and Half Years Master of Nursing Course

One year's studying experience enabled me to be more confident. Additionally, under my tutor Margaret's encouragement, I decided to continue exploring knowledge. On the second semester of my Master study, I enrolled in a topic called Mental Health. During tutorial, some students argued that international students should be considered as a vulnerable group due to the language barriers, culture shock and emotional distress. This reminded me of the importance of relaxation.

Palliative Care Management was an interesting topic, which indicates that truth telling exerts a positive influence on improving the quality of life of the dying patient. In Chinese culture, families and doctors are less likely to tell dying patients' real prognosis. In order to build up my knowledge in this field, I enrolled in topics, like Communication at the End of Life and Bereavement and Loss. As a matter of fact, these topics made me depressed due to sorrowful stories and limited medicine. Luckily, my tutor Margaret, whom I called Australian mother, assisted me with overcoming these difficulties by communicating, encouraging and doing some activities with

me. On 16 December, 2010, I got the Degree of Master in Nursing. It was the happiest day in my life since I eventually can tell people that I achieved my goal.

Conclusion

On 6 July, 2012, I left Adelaide permanently, an attractive seaside city. I got a job as a student counsellor in Luoyang Institute of Science and Technology. Soon I will start a new life in my hometown as a middle aged woman. Looking back my past 6-year's unforgettable experience in Australia, I would say I felt proud of my performances. I am really appreciative of many people's unselfish help including my church friends and my Australian tutor Margaret. Furthermore, my precious experience will benefit the healthy growth of my son.

About the Author:

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